Prayer and the Departed Saints

DR. DAVID C. FORD

ANCIENT FAITH TOPICAL SERIES

Prayer and the Departed Saints

DAVID C. FORD, Ph.D.

© Copyright 1991 Ancient Faith Publishing
(formerly known as Conciliar Press)

ANCIENT FAITH
PUBLISHING

A Division of Ancient Faith Ministries
Chesterton, Indiana

Thank you for purchasing this ebook. We want you to read and use this ebook just as you would a printed book.

Lending

After you purchase an Ancient Faith Publishing ebook, you may lend it to one person at a time, provided that you do not retain any copies of the ebook while it is in the possession of another person. This is the same as when you lend a printed book—when you lend the book, you deliver it to someone else and no longer have the book in your possession.

Resale

When you are finished with an Ancient Faith Publishing ebook that you have purchased, you may resell it to one person, provided that you do not retain any copies of the ebook after you sell it. This is the same as when you sell a printed book—when you sell the book, you deliver it to the buyer and no longer have the book in your possession.

Copyright

Ebooks published by Ancient Faith Publishing (formerly known as Conciliar Press) are protected, without limitation, pursuant to copyright law. Reproduction, duplication, or distribution of all or any part of a book published by Ancient Faith Publishing/Conciliar Press for anything other than your personal, noncommercial use is a violation of terms and conditions posted at our website and also of copyright law (unless you have written permission from Ancient Faith Publishing).

Please contact us at ebooks@ancientfaith.com if you have received this ebook in a manner that violates the above guidelines—for example, if someone shares an ebook file with a group or posts a file at a website for multiple simultaneous downloads.

"Daddy, what happens when someone dies?"

Not an easy question to answer—especially when it has been brought on by the loss of a family member or close friend. To many, there is no answer. Death is the great unknown, the destroyer, the invincible foe whose untimely appearance, for many, signals only the cessation of life.

The Bible teaches that the answer to the mystery of death is found in the life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and One of the Holy Trinity. Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, death itself has been vanquished and the power of the grave overthrown. Death has been "swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54), says Saint Paul. The joy of eternal life is offered to those who live in Him.

All Christians agree on this central facet of the Faith. Yet there are many differing opinions concerning the nature of life beyond the veil. Though Christians do not look upon death with the same sense of hopelessness and dread as do "those who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13), there are still many questions that arise. We

know that in Christ, death is not invincible. But it can still appear as a powerful and fearful enemy whose presence is surrounded by mystery and the unknown.

Christians may ask: What happens when a believer dies? Does his or her spirit go immediately to heaven? Are the souls of the dead conscious? Are they actively involved in what is going on around them, or do they remain asleep until the day of resurrection? Do our departed friends and loved ones in Christ remember us? Are they aware of what is taking place here on earth? Are they still involved somehow in our day-to-day lives? Do the saints of old—those who lived especially holy lives dedicated to the service of God—still play an active role in the Church today? Is it possible to ask them to pray for us and to intercede on our behalf?

For the Orthodox Church, such questions as those above are not peripheral aspects of the Faith. The Church's answers to these questions form the basis for important elements of her worship and spirituality. The concern that the Church has for those who have departed in Christ flows from the all-encompassing, never-ending love she has for *all* her members—those still alive on this earth, and those who have preceded us into the world beyond.

I would like to address two aspects of this important matter of life after death from an Orthodox vantage point. In Part One, I wish to deal with questions concerning the state of the soul after death and the life of those who have died in Christ. In Part Two, I will focus on issues concerning our relationship with the saints in heaven and, in particular, the intercession of the saints. All of these issues are important aspects of the doctrine often referred to as "the communion of saints."

Orthodox practices in this area are often misunderstood. Protestants often fear their resemblance to the Roman Catholic practices that the Reformers reacted so strongly against. And Roman Catholics are often perplexed by the similarities and the differences Orthodox practices seem to have with their own. Let's take a look at some of these critical issues from an Orthodox perspective.

Part I
THE STATE OF THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

Does the soul, once it has left the body at the moment of physical death, remain conscious and aware of what is going on around it?

When we turn to the Scriptures, the fact of continued awareness of the soul after death is repeatedly borne out. Take, for instance, Hebrews 12:22–24: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, *to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven,* to God the Judge of all, *to the spirits of just men made perfect,* to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel."

The words I have italicized in this passage refer to those God-loving souls who have passed from this life to be with Christ in the next. They are part of the Church in heaven (what some would call the "Church Triumphant"), living consciously with Christ, though still awaiting His Second Coming, when they will be clothed with their glorified bodies at the resurrection of the dead. Surely this passage would not say that in the Church's worship we are in the presence of angels, God the Father, Jesus, and "the spirits of just men made perfect" if these spirits were somehow inactive and unaware!

The Hebrews passage is not in isolation. We find many other indications in Scripture that the spirits of those who have died are very much alert and aware of

what is taking place both in heaven and on earth. Consider, for example, the following:

- Jesus' words in Luke 20:37, 38, where He states, "But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him."
- The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), in which Jesus relates the conversation of Abraham in Paradise with the deceased rich man, whose soul has descended into Hades.
- Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).
- The Book of Revelation, which shows us the saints in heaven, before the Great Tribulation, being very active indeed—falling on their faces in worship before the throne of God, casting their crowns to the King of Glory, singing His praises, and speaking to Him (Revelation 4:4, 10, 11; 5:8–10, 13; 6:9–11; 7:9–12).
- The personal testimony of Saint Paul. When he wrote to the Philippians, Saint Paul expressed faith that he would be alive with Christ after his death: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you" (Philippians 1:23, 24). He wrote to the Corinthians very similarly: "We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8).
- The Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36), which

demonstrate clearly that the faithful departed continue to live by the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus there.

- Hebrews 12:1, which exhorts us, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [including the Old Testament heroes of faith listed in chapter 11], let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us." These "witnesses" are the saints from all ages, both known and unknown, canonized and uncanonized. Certainly they would not have been called "witnesses" if they were unconscious of their surroundings.

The Seventh Day Adventists and a few other Protestant groups hold a doctrine called "soul-sleep"—which asserts that after death the soul is asleep, or in some other way unconscious, not to be awakened until the trumpet announces the Second Coming of Christ. What about this?

This teaching is foreign to historic Christian Orthodoxy and did not appear until the time of the Protestant Reformation. The key scriptural passage used to support this view is 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, where Saint Paul says that those who "sleep in Jesus" will precede those who are still alive on earth in the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns.

In its proper context, however, this passage must be seen as describing death from the point of view of those left behind, not from the point of view of the departed. As Saint Paul says at the beginning of these verses, "I do not want *you* to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest *you* sorrow as others who

have no hope" (verse 13, italics mine). For those of us who remain, death is a mystery. To us, the dead "sleep"; they are silent, motionless, and lifeless. But as we have clearly seen already from the Scriptures, they are far from "asleep" in terms of their own awareness and activity.

The essence of the matter is this: Jesus Christ has conquered death. All who live in Him share in this victory. As He said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25, 26). Thus, for those in Christ, *physical* death causes only a temporary, physical separation between those with Him in the next life (the Church in heaven) and those left on earth. Death does not, however, cause a *spiritual* separation between the dead and the living, for Jesus is still the Lord of both groups.

Together, these two groups, the Church in heaven and the Church on earth (sometimes called "the Church militant"), comprise the one, whole, undivided Church, which Saint Paul calls "His [Christ's] body" (Ephesians 1:22, 23). The love that knits together in perfect unity these two aspects of Christ's Body prevails forever, for "love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8). As Saint Paul also says, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38, 39).

What other evidence is there to support the claim that those who have departed are conscious and involved with the affairs of heaven and earth?

Through the centuries, one way the Church has experienced this great Christian truth is that, at times, especially Christlike persons after their deaths have appeared to people living on earth. We have already referred to the occasion when Peter, James, and John saw and heard Moses and Elijah when they appeared and talked with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8).

Perhaps the earliest testimony about such an event after the apostolic era is recorded in *The Martyrdom of Ignatius*. This is an eyewitness account concerning Saint Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, who was thrown to the lions by the Romans in about A.D. 110.[1] The writers of this account relate, "Having ourselves been eyewitnesses of these things [his martyrdom] . . . we spent the whole night in tears within the house, and having entreated the Lord, with bended knees and much prayer . . . it came to pass, on our falling into a brief slumber, that some of us saw the blessed Ignatius suddenly standing by us and embracing us, while others beheld him again praying for us, and others still saw him dropping with sweat, as if he had just come from his great labor, and standing by the Lord. When, therefore, we had with great joy witnessed these things, and had compared our several visions together, we sang praise to God."[2]

A much more contemporary example of this kind of event comes from the twentieth century. Saint Nektarios, beloved bishop of Pentapolis, Egypt, and founder of the Holy Trinity Convent on the Greek island of Aegina, died on November 9, 1920, in a hospital in Athens. Since then he has appeared many times, either in dreams or visions, as he continues his ministry to his earthly flock, giving spiritual counsel and being an instrument

of God's healing power. As Saint Nektarios's biographer relates, "It has become well known that many Greek Orthodox Christians who were incurably ill, suffering, and close to death, have seen a live old monk wearing a cap appear to them. It does not matter who they are, or from where they are, for many times he has been seen in far away countries other than Greece. He always smiles softly and consoles them, assuring them that they will regain health, and not to fear, for God will not abandon them. He simply reminds them to have patience and faith. 'And who are you, old man?' many ask in a moment of astonishment. 'I am the former bishop of Pentapolis, Nektarios of Aegina,' the monk replies, and then vanishes."[3]

Why does the Orthodox Church encourage its members to pray for the dead? Some would say that such a practice is at best superstitious, and perhaps even heretical.

The Scriptures very strictly forbid any attempt to summon the spirits of the dead or to engage them in conversation (see for example Leviticus 19:31 and 20:6, as well as 1 Samuel 28). But knowing that our Christian parents, grandparents, children, brothers, sisters, and friends live on with Christ after they die, and remembering the great unity that we still have with them as fellow-members of Christ's Body, the Church finds nothing in the Scriptures that would prohibit Christians from expressing love for and maintaining a sense of fellowship with those who have died. And what better way do we have to express our love than to pray for them?[4]

Someone might object, "If they are already in

heaven, how can they possibly need our prayers? Their eternal destiny is already settled!"

Very true! One's eternal destiny—whether one spends eternity in heaven or in hell—is determined by how one believes and lives in this life. The Orthodox Church does not claim that prayers for someone who died in opposition to God can save that soul from hell, since the Scriptures clearly teach that there is no chance for repentance after death (Luke 16:19–31; Hebrews 9:27; etc.).

While firmly believing this, the Church still teaches that prayer for the dead in Christ is helpful to them. Why? Because in the Orthodox view, sanctification is seen not as a point-in-time occurrence, but as a process that never ends. As Saint Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18, RSV). And in 1 Corinthians 1:18, which the King James Version translates as, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God," the phrase "which are saved" in the original Greek is *sozomenois*, which means literally, "who are being saved."

For this reason, Orthodox Christians look upon salvation itself as a dynamic process, a continual growth in holiness, purity, and closeness with God, which continues even in heaven. Since we are created beings, and God alone is Uncreated, how can we imagine that men and women will ever *fully* comprehend God or be *totally* filled with His Holiness, His Uncreated Life? He is infinite Love and infinite Holiness: those with Him

in heaven are blessed to grow in this Love and Holiness infinitely.

There is another aspect to this ongoing process of sanctification. Christians of all ages have realized, in their struggle against the sinful impulses of the flesh and the temptations of the devil, that when we commit sin, we inflict wounds upon ourselves: "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Of course, Orthodoxy also considers sins to be the breaking of God's commands, which requires repentance and asking His forgiveness. But the Church realizes, from long pastoral experience, that serious sin cripples and deadens our souls, and distorts the image of God in us. Sin can leave long-lasting scars even after God's forgiveness is granted and accepted.

The *effects* of sustained sin—our own and that of others—do not simply vanish when we accept God's forgiveness, though this remission of our guilt is certainly the crucial first step towards total healing. Only through an ongoing life of faith in Christ do we gradually become cleansed and healed, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, from these wounds of sin. This happens as we gradually become more and more suffused with God's light and love—as we ever more completely partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Just as this process is never completed in anyone's life while on earth—no one becomes sinless—it is the Orthodox understanding that sanctification continues on, in some way, into the world beyond—especially in the beginning stages of the next life. The Church believes that our prayers for the departed can help them in this process of healing and purification.

There is yet another dimension to this question. Not only do our prayers help the departed, but praying

for them helps us as well. It keeps their remembrance alive in us, helping our hearts to stay warm and full of love towards them. It gives us a way to experience a sense of their presence, since prayer is far more than simply the making of requests. It keeps them before our eyes as living examples of Christian faith for us to emulate.

Prayer for the departed also gives us another way to continue in the awesome privilege of participating in God's ongoing work of the salvation, sanctification, and glorification of every soul whom He draws to Himself (Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 1:3–12; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 12). And a vivid remembrance of those living with Christ in heaven can more thoroughly and deeply assure us that there truly is life after death, which can help diminish any fear of death we may have.

We can see, then, that our prayers for the departed help preserve and increase the unity between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven—which helps both aspects of the Church. As a contemporary British Orthodox theologian, Bishop Kallistos Ware, says, "Just as Orthodox Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask for one another's prayers, so they pray also for the faithful departed and ask the faithful departed to pray for them. Death cannot sever the bond of mutual love which links the members of the Church together."[5]

Does the Orthodox Church teach the doctrine of Purgatory?

Actually, the Orthodox have fought strongly against this Roman Catholic doctrine. This innovation was not officially pronounced until 1274 at the Council of Lyons,

and then was greatly expanded upon at the Council of Florence in 1439. It included the idea that the dead in Purgatory (understood as a separate, specific place) suffer punishments to atone for all their sins committed on earth—even sins confessed and repented of—for which they had not fully undergone punishment while they still lived on earth.

Orthodoxy firmly rejects such ideas. Saint Mark, Orthodox Bishop of Ephesus, stated, in opposition to the Latin views proposed at the Council of Florence, that believing souls who had committed sins while on earth "must be cleansed from this kind of sins, but not by means of some purgatorial fire or a definite punishment in some place (for this, as we have said, has not at all been handed down to us)."[6] This cleansing can be seen as a kind of "chastening of the Lord" (Hebrews 12:5–11), a further experience of the Lord's "refiner's fire" (Malachi 3:2, 3; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; Job 23:10; Psalm 66:10), which all Christians experience repeatedly during this life.

This cleansing and purifying is part of the foretaste of the glory and peace of heaven, which the righteous souls enjoy already, as they await their full glorification in the Kingdom of Heaven after the Last Judgment. This purification process in no way involves undergoing punishments for confessed and repented sins. To the Orthodox, God's boundless love and mercy make such an idea quite preposterous. On the other hand, for those who die estranged from God, physical death brings a foretaste of hell as they await the final judgment at Christ's return.

After the Council of Florence, the Latin Church developed the even more objectionable idea that people on earth could purchase indulgences on behalf of the

dead which would alleviate or entirely stop their expiatory suffering in Purgatory. It was explained that the indulgences drew upon the *extra merits* of the saints already in heaven—those exceptionally holy people who had earned more than enough merit to warrant their own salvation.

From the Orthodox perspective, the Protestant Reformers rightly abhorred and denounced this practice of buying indulgences based on a supposed "storehouse of merit" of the saints. Apart from the grace of Christ, there is no way to "merit" one's salvation—either personally, or through the good works of a saint. But in putting an end to this practice in their own churches, the Reformers overreacted and went on to abandon the ancient and universally held practices of praying for the departed and honoring the saints. In their zeal to correct error, the Reformers went too far, letting an abuse of something good lead to the rejection of the practice itself—a case of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water.

Part II
THE INTERCESSION OF THE SAINTS

Why does the Church hold up certain men and women as examples and encourage that special honor and respect be given to them?

When particularly dedicated Christians consistently demonstrate throughout their lives a great love for Christ and their fellowman, and when they live and die in unusually vibrant hope and joy in Him, they are remembered with special fervor by their fellow Christians left behind on earth. Accounts of their good deeds, their wise words, and very often, miraculous events associated with their lives, are spread by word of mouth.

Miracles often occur at the graves of such individuals. An excellent biblical account of such an occurrence can be found in 2 Kings 13:20, 21. Here, a man was raised to life merely by coming into contact with the bones of Elisha. In addition, miracles often occur in respect to the earthly possessions of the saints. We are told in the New Testament that even Saint Paul's handkerchiefs became instruments of God's healing (Acts 19:11, 12).

An example of such an event in recent times occurred at the death of Saint Nektarios. Just after Nektarios died, the nurses changing his clothing threw his woolen undershirt onto the bed of a paralyzed man in the same room; the invalid was healed, immediately standing up and walking for the first time in many years.[7]

Knowledge of such events is further spread when

accounts of them are recorded and circulated. This encourages more people to ask the person for his or her heavenly intercessions. Thus the devotion to the person spreads in a very organic, spontaneous way. Such developments usually lead the Church to formally honor such particularly holy persons through the process of canonization (often called "glorification" by the Orthodox).

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which has a very detailed, step-by-step procedure for canonization, the Orthodox Church simply recognizes officially the popular devotion which has spontaneously surrounded the memory of the holy man, woman, or child.[8] Usually this is done at a regional or national level, where awareness of the saint's life tends to be greatest, but the other Orthodox Churches may announce their recognition of the canonization as well. All this is done so that the popular piety surrounding the saint is channeled and safeguarded under the protective mantle of the Church, and so that those living beyond the local area where the saint lived can become aware of him or her.

What basis is there for asking the saints to pray for us?

As we have seen, the Church holds in high esteem the memory of exceptionally holy Christians who, during their earthly lives, helped many of their fellow believers both physically and spiritually. Therefore, it should be no surprise that she encourages the faithful to seek the continued intercession of such individuals after their passage into the next world.

An example of such an appeal is in a hymn to Saint Sergius of Radonezh, a very beloved monk and spiritual father to many in fourteenth-century Russia: "The Holy

Spirit took up His abode in thee and, operating there, adorned thee with beauty. O thou who hast boldness to approach the Holy Trinity, remember thy flock gathered by thy wisdom and never forget it, visiting thy children according to thy promise, O holy father Sergius."[9]

A similar appeal is made to Saint Herman, Orthodox evangelizer of Alaska in the early 1800s: "Having one desire, to bring unbelieving people to the One God, thou wert all things to all men: teaching the Holy Scripture and a life in accordance with it, instructing in handicrafts, and being an intercessor before the authorities, nursing men in everything like children, that thus thou mightest bring them to God; and do not leave us who sing to thee."[10]

Since death has been conquered by Christ, why should not such persons continue their ministry to us after they have joined Christ in heaven? A Russian Orthodox priest in the early twentieth century once chided those who do not believe in a true fellowship of prayer with the departed: "A handful of soil, a tombstone, have become [for you] unconquerable obstacles for communion with those who have departed from the world."[11]

Countless Christians of all lands and ages have given testimony about receiving help from God through the prayers and ministrations of saints. This is a strong indication that God is well pleased with their prayers for us and ours to them. Scripture attests to the sanctity of such prayers in the Book of Revelation: "The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Revelation 5:8).

But doesn't the Bible say, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5)? Why do we need to ask the saints to pray for us?

Yes, Christ Jesus, both Man and God, is the only One who has reconciled fallen humanity to God the Father by His reconciling and redeeming life, death, and resurrection. But this does not mean that we never ask others to pray for us!

We ask the departed saints for their prayers in the same way we ask our fellow Christians on earth to intercede for us. Since the departed remain alive in Christ, why should they cease to express their love and concern for us through prayer? Freed from the concerns of day-to-day survival on earth, unencumbered with the sinful tendencies of the flesh, and far more intimately knit together with Christ than we are, the departed are able to intercede for us much more frequently and powerfully than our friends on earth can pray for us. Those in heaven are able to do continuously what we on earth long to do, but usually only manage to do weakly and sporadically. No wonder, then, that Christians from the earliest days have asked the departed for their prayers.

This in no way means that we can *only* reach Christ by going through the saints, as if they are absolutely necessary intermediaries between us and God. Such an idea is completely foreign to Orthodoxy. Saint Paul clearly states, "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God . . . let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:14–16).

But the fact that we pray, on our own, directly to God does not mean that we never ask other people for their prayers. Indeed, we are commanded many times in the Scriptures to pray for one another. Saint Paul says to Timothy, "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men" (1 Timothy 2:1; see also Colossians 4:2–4; Ephesians 6:18; etc.). And we are taught by our Lord Jesus that the power of prayer is greater when more people are praying together: "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:19).

So, just as we feel comforted and strengthened when we ask friends, family, and Church members here on earth to intercede for us in a time of need, how much more can we feel comforted and strengthened when we also ask the Church in heaven for her prayers! (And we should not neglect to ask the angels for their prayers as well, since they are expressly sent to us as "ministering spirits" [Hebrews 1:14; also Psalm 91:11; Isaiah 63:9]). Asking the saints, both those on earth and those in heaven,[12] for their prayers, and asking the angels, too, can all be understood simply as gathering the greatest amount of prayer support possible in a time of need.

Can the saints answer our prayers directly? Is it within their power to grant our requests?

The prayers of our brothers and sisters in Christ here on earth are only effective insofar as God answers them. It is the same with the intercessions of the saints in heaven for us. They can never answer prayers of their own accord or

in their own power; they can only beseech Christ on our behalf. To imagine that prayer to the saints means that they can grant our requests apart from Christ is a totally unacceptable idea according to Orthodox theology and practice.

So when we pray to the saints, the understanding is always clear that we are asking them to help us by *praying to God*, and not by their own power or actions apart from Him. For example, a hymn to Saint Nina (who as a young woman in the early fourth century brought the Christian Faith to Georgia, in southern Eurasia) concludes, "With the angels thou hast praised in song the Redeemer, praying constantly for us that Christ may grant us His grace and mercy."[13]

But as to their ability to hear our requests for their prayers, we ought not to limit the powers of spiritual perception of those who are now so intimately linked with God. If we on earth experience the help of the Holy Spirit praying in us and through us (Romans 8:26, 27), how much more must the Spirit's help be present in the saints in heaven? And we should remember that in heaven, in the spiritual realm, there are none of the limitations of time, space, or physical mortality that so restrict us as we live on earth.

What does it mean to venerate a saint, and how does this differ from worshipping the creature rather than the Creator—which the Bible strictly forbids?

Once someone is officially canonized, the Church in her worship services no longer prays for the well-being of his or her soul, but publicly asks for the saint's prayers. Icons are made of the saint, hymns are written honoring and

remembering good deeds done, and at least one day of the year is designated as a feast-day for that saint, when his or her icons are displayed and hymns written to the saint are sung. An example of such a hymn is the following, honoring Saint Nina of Georgia (called in ancient times Iberia):

"O come all and let us chant to Nina, equal of the Apostles, the godly-wise enlightener of Iberia, for she has banished the seduction of the idols by leading us from darkness to light, and has taught us to praise the Trinity, One in essence. Therefore, all the faithful celebrate her revered memory and praise our Savior."[14]

The hymns, the icons, the feast-days are all important aspects of the *veneration* of the saint, indicating profound respect and love for the person, but in no way do these things mean that the person is being *worshipped*. Worship, of course, is due only to God. And indeed, all the veneration expressed to a saint is entirely based on that person's closeness to Christ. Every saint has become holy only through the mercy and grace of God; it is He who is glorified when we honor His holy ones. As Christ Himself prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them . . . *and the glory which You gave Me I have given them,* that they may be one just as We are one" (John 17:10, 22; my emphasis).

Other scriptural indications of God's overflowing love for His saints, in which His Church seeks to participate through her veneration of them and prayers to them, are given in Psalm 97:10 ("He preserves the souls of His saints"); Psalm 116:15 ("Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints"); Psalm 149:5, 9 ("Let the saints be joyful in glory . . . this honor have

all His saints"); Proverbs 2:8 ("He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints"); and Daniel 7:22 ("until the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom").

Saint Nicholas of Zicha in Serbia, who died in Pennsylvania in 1956 and who compiled short lives of saints for every day of the year, describes this precious relationship between Christ and His saints in this way:

"The saints are a burnished mirror in which are reflected the beauty and strength and majesty of Christ. They are the fruit on that Tree of Life which is Christ. . . . As the sun among the stars and a king among his nobles, so is Christ among His saints. This works in both directions—from Christ to the saints and from them to Christ: the saints are given meaning by Christ, and Christ is revealed through the saints."[15]

While we could say that the Church is most entirely assured of the salvation of those souls whom she officially canonizes and venerates, this certainly does not mean that salvation and saintliness are limited only to them. Thus, it is perfectly acceptable to ask others besides the canonized saints for their intercessions. However, this is not done publicly in the Church's worship services, but in one's private prayers. Bishop Kallistos (Ware) gives an example: "It would be perfectly normal for an Orthodox child, if orphaned, to end his evening prayers by asking for the intercessions not only of the Mother of God and the saints, but of his own mother and father."[16]

Conclusion
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church (the regular Sunday morning and holy day worship service, always centered in Holy Communion) is always offered in some way for all the dead in Christ. Although the Orthodox never offer Divine Liturgies in behalf of *particular* persons or causes, there are the following words in the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom (the service done on most Sundays in the Orthodox Church):

"And again we offer unto Thee this reasonable service for all those who in faith have gone before us to their rest: patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith, especially our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary."

These words affirm the ineffable unity that bonds together the Church on earth with the Church in heaven. The heavenly Church is most assuredly included when the Church on earth gathers to worship, as we saw earlier when we quoted Hebrews 12:22–24 (a passage to which this quotation from the Liturgy obviously refers). We are all truly one in Christ, through whom and in whom death has been totally transcended. Thus, when Christ offers His Body and Blood to us in the Holy Eucharist, He does so not only for the benefit of those members of His Church on earth, but also for those members of His Church in heaven.

Since our Lord loves us with much more love than we can ever imagine, surely our brothers and sisters in

Christ, who are being ever more greatly filled with His love as they abide with Him in heaven, also love us more than we realize. Certainly they rejoice in our continuing expressions of love for them—our various remembrances of them, and our prayers for them and to them. Undoubtedly, however, they continue to love us and pray for us even when we do not remember them.

I have not personally had a vision of a saint or an angel (though I know of people who have), but I am certain from ongoing experience that they are always nearby. And I know that the more time we spend in prayerful fellowship with the saints, the more we can sense their presence and feel their comforting love.

To ignore the continuing presence, the fervent love, and the greatly effective prayers of our Christian brothers and sisters who have departed from us is a tragic loss. Not only do we then miss all the benefits of fellowship—of communion—in the Spirit with them, but also we diminish rather than increase the degree of unity that should bind all those in Christ on both sides of physical death.

My earnest prayer is that all of us who believe in Christ will seek to know the saints better. And may a growing richness of communion with His holy ones help to bring us all ever closer to our Lord Jesus Christ.

FOOTNOTES

1. Antioch was the first major Christian center after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70; it was here that the followers of Christ were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26).
2. *The Martyrdom of Ignatius,* Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), vol. 1, p. 131.
3. Sotos Chondropoulos, *Saint Nektarios, A Saint for Our Times* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1989), p. 277.
4. Actually, there is one clear scriptural precedent for praying for the dead. This is the example of Judas Maccabeus, leader of the Jewish revolt against Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C., who prayed and offered a sin offering for some of his soldiers who had fallen in battle. The text says, "In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection" (2 Maccabees 12:39–45). While the two books of the Maccabees are not in the Protestant Bible, they have always been part of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Scriptures. This is because they were included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, which the entire early Church used.
5. Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 258.
6. Quoted by Father Seraphim Rose in *The Soul After Death* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1980), p. 209.
7. Chondropoulos, p. 265.
8. It is good to remember that the canonized saints are

of all ages and from all walks of life, from soldier to nun, from bishop to housewife.

9. Troparion for the Feast of Saint Sergius, September 25.
10. Sticheron hymn to Saint Herman of Alaska from Great Vespers on December 13.
11. Father Kyril Zaits, as recorded in *Missionary Conversations with Protestant Sectarians,* compiled and translated by Deacon Lev Puhalo and Vasili Novakshonoff (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1973), p. 35.
12. The fact that the Orthodox Church canonizes certain people as "saints" (*agioi*) does not mean that Christ's followers on earth cannot also sometimes be referred to as saints (*agioi*), as by Saint Paul in Ephesians 6:18; Romans 1:7; etc. In the Divine Liturgy, the service done each Sunday in the Orthodox Church, shortly before the faithful receive the Holy Eucharist (communion), the priest proclaims, "Holy things are for the holy [ones] (*agiois*)."
13. *The Life of Saint Nina, Equal of the Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1988), p. 26. This hymn is from the Matins service for January 14.
14. *The Life of Saint Nina,* p. 26. She is considered the patron saint of Georgia to this day.
15. Saint Nicholas of Zicha, *The Prologue from Ochrid* (Birmingham, England: Lazarica Press, 1985), vol. 1, p. 4. This four-volume set is an excellent source of knowledge about hundreds of Orthodox saints.
16. Ware, p. 260.

Other Topical Booklets
available from Ancient Faith Publishing:

Finding the New Testament Church
By Fr. Jon E. Braun
Scripture and Tradition
By Fr. Thomas Zell
Which Came First: The Church or the N.T.?
By Fr. A. James Bernstein
The Original Christian Gospel
By Fr. A James Bernstein
What Orthodox Christians Believe
A Conciliar Press Compendium
Mary, Ever Virgin?
By Fr. John Hainsworth
Building a Habit of Prayer
Compiled by Fr. Marc Dunaway
No Graven Image
By Fr. Jack N. Sparks
Confession: The Healing Sacrament
By Jim Forest
Practical Prayer
By Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh
Forgiveness and Reconciliation
By Metropolitan Jonah
and more. . .

$1.50 each plus applicable tax, postage and handling.
Discounts available on pre-packaged sets of
five booklets of the same title.
Please call to place a credit card order
or to request a free catalog:
(800) 967-7377 or (219) 728-2216
or visit us at store.ancientfaith.com

ANCIENT FAITH
PUBLISHING

A Division of Ancient Faith Ministries

Call or write for a free catalog:
P.O. Box 748, Chesterton, IN 46304
800-967-7377 or 219-728-2216
store.ancientfaith.com

Orthodox programming, blogs, and products
www.ancientfaith.com